

Why Women's Leadership is Necessary to Deliver the SDGs

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This year marks the third year of the COVID-19 pandemic. Its negative impacts, including economic distress coupled with and intensified by the Ukraine crisis and increased food insecurity, are imperilling achievement of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The [2022 High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development \(HLPF\)](#), running from 5–15 July, is an opportunity to take stock of progress in the midst of these challenges and to highlight the current and potential roles of women in getting the world back on track with just eight years to go.

Two of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to be reviewed in-depth at the HLPF, SDG 5 ('gender equality and women's and girls' empowerment') and SDG 17 ('partnerships'), place women in the spotlight – the first due to its direct focus on gender parity, and the second because women play instrumental roles in the partnerships delivering on the 2030 Agenda. A key question is how well we are doing in reaching these two goals and in improving women's leadership at local, national, regional and global levels.

The value of women's leadership can be seen in characteristics associated with their leadership style, including cooperation, collaboration, and inclusivity,¹ all of which are needed to better advance the SDGs. Studies have shown that awareness, knowledge, attitudes and support of gender equity are enhanced² – an overarching objective at the heart of much of the 2030 Agenda – when more women are in leadership positions. Studies have also shown that greater political participation of women results in increased investments in social protection, health, and education policies and programs.³ However, women are starkly under-represented at all levels of decision making, indicating that action is long overdue to tip the scales.

Much more should be done to improve women's political participation:

- Just 10 of the 193 United Nations member states have a woman head of state, and 13 have a woman head of government.⁴
- Only around 26% of parliamentarians around the world are women, ranging across countries from a low of 0% to a high of 61%.⁵
- Data from 133 countries shows that women constitute about one third (36%) of elected members in local deliberative bodies such as councils or assemblies.⁶

Gender equality in the workforce is also crucial to economic growth and sustainable development.

Yet, globally women continue to earn, on average, 20% less than men; represent only about 28% of managers across sectors; face numerous hurdles to entering and advancing in the workplace; and overwhelmingly shoulder unpaid work such as caretaking and household duties.⁷ In the health care sector, women represent around 71% of the global workforce, but only about 26% of leadership positions.^{8,9} According to a study by Global Health 50/50, women from low-and middle-income countries make up 42% of the global population but hold only 9% of board seats where global health decisions are being made.¹⁰ These figures call for further shifting of power and influence in global health away from historically dominating wealthier countries as well as increasing women's leadership in global health decision making.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, women have suffered disproportionate job and income losses, while also representing a larger percentage of workers on the front lines of response efforts. In September 2021, for example, women were more likely than men to report loss of employment (26% compared to 20.4%).¹¹

Another issue central to the achievement of gender equality is the realization of women's sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR). Policies protecting these rights are under threat in places ranging from the United States, with the overturning of *Roe v. Wade*, to Afghanistan, where young women's and girls' access to education is being curtailed. Such developments have potentially dire consequences for this and future generations.

All this evidence makes clear that there is a lot of ground to make up. Today's vast gender disparities in leadership and the workforce will not be overcome quickly or easily, given the complexity of issues such as recruitment, training, and resistance from entrenched interests. Preventing reversals in SRHR will also require concerted efforts and sensitivity to context-specific issues. **All stakeholders involved in delivering the 2030 Agenda have roles to play to bolster and improve women's leadership opportunities and influence, including for adolescent girls and young women to develop the leaders of the future.** For example:

- Governments and parliamentarians can proactively endorse and boost women's representation in executive and legislative bodies, making a point to ensure they have real power as well as numbers. Most of the countries that have achieved or surpassed 40% representation of women in parliament, for example, have introduced legislated gender quotas – either candidate quotas or reserved seats.
- Governments should ensure that workplace policies across all sectors are gender responsive. During the pandemic, for example, women fared better in countries that took measures to protect jobs and permit flexible work arrangements. Strategies to eliminate gender bias in the workforce and to promote diversity and inclusivity such as parental leave benefits should also be implemented so that women are able to advance in their careers.
- Civil society at all levels, from grassroots to global, can advocate more strongly and in more focused, targeted ways for improving women's opportunities to become leaders – while also setting and meeting their own high standards. Civil society members should also continue to play a key role in championing SRHR to ensure these rights are upheld.
- Multilateral organizations can ensure that women's voices and guidance influence existing activities and partnerships, while also supporting the creation of new ones led by women. Many multilateral organizations are undergoing reform processes to improve inclusivity and gender balance, and these efforts should continue.
- All actors, including governments, civil society, multilateral organizations, donors and health care professional associations, should support adolescent girls and young women to become leaders; create opportunities for adolescent girls and young women to be involved in designing programs and policies impacting their life opportunities; and invest in youth-led accountability processes.

Interwoven throughout the SDGs is the principle of equality. The prominence of gender equality in the 2030 Agenda is due in part to the strong correlation between it and greater peace and prosperity.

Hence, addressing the glaring gender imbalances in the political sphere and improving women's employment trajectories will not only benefit individual women and their families, but whole societies and, ultimately, the world. The HLPF represents an opportunity to discuss strategies for lifting women up and helping them reach their potential, including through increasing their meaningful engagement in the partnerships mobilized to achieve the SDGs.

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¹ See, for example, Abdulrahman, Maral, and Amoush, Arwa Hussein Mohamad, 'Female characteristics and their new roles in leadership', *Journal of Business and Management Sciences*, 10 April 2020, 8(2), 38-47.

² Mousa, Mariam, et al., 'Advancing women in healthcare leadership: a systematic review and meta-synthesis of multi-sector evidence on organisational interventions', *EClinicalMed*. 1 September 2021; 39, 101084.

³ Piccone, Ted, 'Democracy, gender equality, and security', Brookings Institute: Democracy and Security Dialogue Policy Brief Series, September 2017.

⁴ UN Women, 'Facts and figures: women's leadership and political participation', <www.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/leadership-and-political-participation/facts-and-figures>. Note: This figure represents UN Women calculation based on information provided by permanent missions to the United Nations. Some leaders hold positions of both head of government and head of state; only elected heads of state have been taken into account. Note: Queen Elizabeth II of the United Kingdom is formally head of state of 15 countries, but in this calculation she is only counted once.

⁵ Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), Global data on national parliaments, <data.ipu.org> (as of 1 May 2022).

⁶ SDG indicator 5.5.1, series: proportion of elected seats held by women in deliberative bodies of local government. Latest available data from the United Nations Global SDG database is 2020, <[Unstats.un.org/sdgs/dataportal](http://unstats.un.org/sdgs/dataportal)>, accessed 30 June 2022. The metadata for SDG 5.5.1 explains that each local government unit typically includes a legislative/deliberative body and an executive body. Legislative/deliberative bodies, such as councils or assemblies, are formal entities with a prescribed number of members as per national or state legislation.

⁷ International Labour Organization (ILO), 'Making women's work visible: the 19th ICLS standards, purpose, and progress', November 2020; ILO, 'Building forward fairer: women's rights to work and at work at the core of the COVID-19 recovery', Policy brief, July 2021.

⁸ Pérez-Sánchez, Soledad, Madueño, Sara Eichau, and Montaner, Joan, 'Gender gap in the leadership of health institutions: the influence of hospital-level factors', *Health Equity*, August 2021, 5(1), 521-525.

<<https://doi.org/10.1089/heq.2021.0013>>

⁹ World Health Organization, 'Delivered by women, led by men: a gender and equity analysis of the global health and social workforce', Human Resources for Health Observer Series No. 24, March 2019.

¹⁰ Gender 50/50, 'Boards for all? A review of power, policy and people on the boards of organisations active in global health', Cambridge, UK, 2022. <<https://globalhealth5050.org/2022-Report>>

¹¹ Morgan, Rosemary, Pimenta, Denise Nacif, and Rashid, Sabina, 'Gender equality and COVID-19: act now before it is too late', *Lancet*, vol. 399, issue 10344, 2 March 2022.